

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5826

INFO AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 COLOMBO 3518

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT,CE

SUBJECT: GENERAL ELECTIONS: IF AND WHEN

REF: COLOMBO 3272 (NOTAL)

1.SUMMARY. RULING PARTY M.P.'S AND MINISTERS ARE ENGAGED IN A PUBLIC CAMPAIGN TO CONVINCE PRIME MINISTER BANDARANAIKE TO POSPONE GENERAL ELECTIONS DUE BY NEXT YEAR, OUT OF A CONCERN THAT THEIR SRI LANKA FREEDOM PARTY (SLFP) WOULD BE DEFEATED. ALTHOUGH THE PRIME MINISTER HAS PLEDGED THAT ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD, POLITICAL OBSERVERS HERE FEEL THAT SHE MAY BE SWAYED BY HER COLLEGUES' ARGUMENTS. POSTPONEMENT, WHICH COULD BE ACCOMPLISHED LEGALLY BY CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT EXTENDING THE LIFE OF THE ASSEMBLY BEYOND MAY 22, 1977, WOULD FURTHER POLARIZE POLITICAL DEBATE IN SRI LANKA AND INFLAME THE OPPOTITION. EVEN IF THE PM DECIDES TO PURSUE THIS COURSE, SHE MAY NOT BE ABLE TO ROUND UP THE VOTES. WE JUDGE THAT U. S. INTERESTS WOULD BEST BE SERVED BY SRI LANKA'S CONTINUED ADHERENCE TO THE DEMOCRATIC TRADITION OF REGULARLY-SCHEDULED ELECTIONS. END SUMMARY.

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2. AN INTERESTING AND INCREASINGLY MORE PROMINENT FEATURE OF THE SRI LANKAN POLITICAL SCENE RECENTLY HAS BEEN THE CAMPAIGN WITHIN THE RULING SLFP TO POSTPONE ELECTIONS BEYOND NEXT YEAR'S CONSTITUTIONAL DEADLINE. SLFP MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT AND A GROWING NUMBER OF MINISTERS HAVE PUBLICLY QUESTIONED THE NECESSITY OR WISDOM OF HOLDING ELECTIONS AS SCHEDULED. THEY ARE URGING PRIME MINISTER BANDARANAIKE TO FOLLOW THE PATH OF HER SISTER TO THE NORTH, INDIRA GANDHI, AND AS THEY PUT IT, SOLVE THE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS OF THE COUNTRY BEFORE TURNING THE COUNTRY'S ENERGIES TO PARTISAN POLITICS.

3. IF THE PM WERE TO FOLLOW THEIR ADVICE,SHE WOULD BE BREAKING A LONG POST-INDEPENDENCE TRADITION OF REGULAR ELECTIONS IN WHICH THE GOVERNMENT HAS ALTER-NATED BETWEEN THE TWO MAIN POLITICAL PARTIES. UNDER THE PROVISIONS OF THE PRESENT CONSTITUTION, ADOPTED IN 1972, THE NATIONAL STATE ASSEMBLY WILL CEASE TO EXIST ON MAY 22, 1977, IF NOT DISSOLVED PREVIOUSLY. ELECTIONS ARE REQUIRED WITHIN FOUR MONTHS OF MAY 22 (OR THE DATE OF DISSOLUTION, IF EARLIER). THE PM IS ON RECORD THAT THIS CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION WILL BE HONORED. WHEN SHE FACED PRESSURE FOR AN IMMEDIATE ELECTION IN APRIL 1975, SHE PLEDGED THAT HER GOVERNMENT WOULD CONTINUE UNTIL THE DEADLINE (MAY 22, 1977) BUT NOT A DAY LONGER. MORE RECENTLY, SHE WAS PRESSED BY OPPOSITION LEADERS FOR A PLEDGE ON THE FLOOR OF THE ASSEMBLY THAT SHE WOULD HOLD ELECTIONS AS SCHEDULED. SHE REPLIED,IN EARLY JULY 1976, NOT IN THE ASSEMBLY BUT IN A LETTER TO THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, STRESSING THAT SHE HAS REPEATEDLY SAID THAT ELECTIONS WOULD BE HELD AND ADDING THAT "THE LAW PREVAILING WILL BE FOLLOWED."

4. THE CAMPAIGN AMONG BACKBENCHERS AND MINISTERS TO CHANGE HER MIND ARISES FROM THEIR FEAR THAT VOTERS, UNHAPPY OVER RISING PROCES, LOWERED PRODUCTION, AND CONTINUING ECONOMIC MALAISE, WILL DEMONSTRATE THEIR DISPLEASURE IN THE TRADITIONAL CEYLONESE WAY BY VOTING OUT THE RULING PACKY. (ALTHOUGH THE SLFP WON A

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RECENT BY-ELECTION IN MULKIRIGALA (REFTEL), WHERE THE PARTY HAS ALWAYS BEEN STRONG, THE GENERAL TREND OF BY-ELECTIONS HAS BEEN SOLIDLY ANTI-SLFP.)

5. THE PUBLIC RATIONALES OFFERED FOR POSTPONEMENT HAVE BEEN ON A SLIGHTLY HIGHER PLANE.THE AGRICULTURE MINISTER, NECTOR KOBBEKADUWA, HAS TOLD PARTY MEETINGS THAT "THE PEOPLE" DO NOT WANT ELECTIONS AND THAT

THEREFORE THEY SHOULD BE POSTPONED. INDEED THE MOST PROMINENT SLOGAN SHOUTED AT PARTY RALLIES, ON MAY DAY AND MORE RECENTLY AT THE SLFP'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION (SEPTEMBER 2, 1976), HAS BEEN "NO ELECTION IN '77." ANOTHER VARIANT COMES FROM AN INFLUENTIAL PROPONENT OF POSTPONEMENT, MINISTER OF FINANCE AND JUSTICE FELIX R. DIAS BANDARANAIKE, WHO ARGUES THAT A CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT IS DETRIMENTAL TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BECAUSE OF THE TIME WASTED IN PARTISAN POLITICS, RE-STAFFING, ETC. IN A SPEECH SEPTEMBER 5, HE LAMENTED THIS WASTE AND HINTED THAT A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT WOULD BE AN ACCEPTABLE METHOD OF POSTPONING ELECTIONS. BUT, HE POINTED OUT, UNITED FRONT STRENGTH IN THE ASSEMBLY AMOUNTS TO ONLY 102 MP'S, THREE SHORT OF THE NECESSARY TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY. IN FACT, EVEN A FEW SLFP MEMBERS HAVE MADE IT CLEAR THAT THEY WOULD NOT SUPPORT A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT EXTENDING THE LIFE OF THE ASSEMBLY.

6. OTHER EXCUSES FOR POSTPONEMENT BEING OFFERED BY WORRIED SLFP BACKBENCHERS INCLUDE SUCH ARGUMENTS AS "OUR 1970 MANIFESTO PROMISED A SOCIALIST SOCIETY. WE CANNOT GO TO THE VOTERS UNTIL WE ACHIEVE IT" OR "THE NON-ALIGNED WORLD HAS ELECTED THE P.M. AS ITS HEAD FOR THREE YEARS; WE ARE THEREFORE OBLIGATED TO KEEP HER IN OFFICE FOR THAT TERM." THE P.M. HAS GIVEN SOME SUPPORT TO THE LATTER VIEW, ARGUING THAT THE NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT WOULD NOT ACCEPT J.R. JAYEWARDENE AS ITS LEADER (PROMPTING J.R.'S COMMENT THAT, IF IT WERE WITHIN HIS POWER, HE WOULD BE HAPPY TO LEAVE THE LEADERSHIP OF THE THIRD WORLD TO MRS. BANDARANAIKE FOREVER IF HE COULD LEAD SRI LANKA.)

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7. MANY HERE ARGUE THAT THE PM COULD EVENTUALLY BE SWAYED BY THE PROSPECT OF LOSING POWER TO FOLLOW HER COLLEAGUES' ADVICE AND POSTPONE ELECTIONS. SUCH A DECISION COULD HAVE SEVERE DOMESTIC CONSEQUENCES. THE CONSEQUENCES MIGHT BE MITIGATED BUT NOT ELIMINATED BY FINDING A CONSTITUTIONAL PATH TO THIS END. WHATEVER THE MEANS, IN THE MINDS OF THE OPPOSITION, THE MORAL LEGITIMACY OF HER GOVERNMENT WOULD BE LACKING.

8. SOME TAMIL DISSIDENTS IN THE NORTHERN AND EASTERN AREAS OF THE ISLAND ARE EVEN NOW IN SEMI-OPEN REVOLT AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT. ANYTHING WHICH MIGHT THROW THE GOVERNMENT'S VALIDITY INTO QUESTION COULD ONLY INFLAME THE RADICALS AND ATTRACT MANY TAMIL MODERATES WHO HAVE,

SO FAR, KEPT ALOOF FROM THE SEPARATIST MOVEMENT.

9. THE GOVERNMENT'S PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION WOULD ALSO OBJECT VEHEMENTLY. THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, J.R.JAYEWARDENE,HAS DECLARED THAT "I PERSONALLY TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF OVERTHROWING THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT IF IT CONTINUES TO BE IN POWER AFTER MAY 22, 1977". THE OPPOSITION LANKA SAMA SAMAJA PARTY (LSSP) WOULD HAVE ANY ISSUE ON WHICH TO MOBILIZE ITS LARGE URBAN TRADE UNIONS,RELATIVELY QUIET SINCE THE LSSP DEPARTED THE UNITED FRONT IN 1975. LSSP M.P.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 COLOMBO 3518

VIVIENNE GOONEWARDENE HAS ALREADY ACCUSED THE SLFP OF TRYING TO BUY VOTES OF OPPOTITION AND INDEPENDENT M.P.'S IN ORDER TO GET A TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY FOR POSTPONEMENT. PARTY LEADER N.M.PERERA HAS WARNED THE GOVERNMENT THAT IF ANYONE ATTEMPTS TO CURTAIL DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS IN THIS WAY, "SUCH ACTION WILL SPELL THEIR OWN DESTRUCTION." EVEN THE CP, NOW AN UNEASY COALITION PARTNER OF THE SLFP, APPEARS TO OPPOSE POSTPONEMENT OF ELECTIONS AND COULD LEAVE THE UNITED FRONT ON THIS ISSUE, PERHAPS GOING INTO ACTIVE AGITATION WITH THE LSSP. ATTHA, THE PARTY PAPER, REBUKED FELIX DIAS BANDARANAIKE FOR TAKING THE

C.P.'S SIX M.P.'S FOR GRANTED IN HIS PUBLIC "TRIAL
BALLON" PROPOSING A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT.

10. IF ELECTION, WHEN: IF THE PM DOES NOT HEED
THE ADVICE OF THOSE URGING POSTPONMENT (AND THE LIST
NOW INCLUDES, IN ADDITION TO FELIX AND KOBBEKADUWA,
MINISTER OF TRADE ILANGARATNE AND MINISTER OF FOOD
AND COMERATIVE KSURIYARACHCHI), SHE MUST FACE THE
STRATEGIC DECISION OF THE BEST TIME TO HOLD
ELECTIONS. RELEVANT DATES IN MRS. BANDARANAIKE'S
PRIVATE CALCULATIONS MUST INCLUDE:
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1. SEPTEMBER 30, 1976--HER APPEARANCE BEFORE
THE UNGA TO REPORT ON THE RESULTS OF THE
NON-ALIGNED SUMMIT, FROM WHICH SHE WILL NOT
RETURN TO COLOMBO UNTIL MID-OCTOBER.
2. NOVEMBER 3, 1976-THE DATE SET FOR THE
PRESENTATION OF THE BUDGET, INCLUDING
TRADITIONALLY THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC
POLICY FOR THE COMING YEAR.
3. JANUARY 31, 1977--COMPLETION OF VOTERS'
ROLLS FOR NEW ELECTORATES.
4. AUSPICIOUS DATES AS CALCULATED BY HER
ASTROLOGER.

11. IN ADDITION, THE PRIME MINISTER HAS PRIVATELY
REQUESTED AN IVP GRANT FOR THE COMMISSIONER OF
ELECTIONS TO VISIT THE U.S. FROM MID-OCTOBER TO MID-
NOVEMBER OF THIS YEAR, THE IMPLICATION BEING THAT HE
WILL NOT BE NEEDED UNTIL AT LEAST THE END OF 1976
OR EARLY 1977.

12. ONE SCENARIO HAS THE PRIME MINISTER RETURNING IN
OCTOBER FROM THE UN WITH THE AURA OF A QDRDL STATES-
WOMAN AND DISSOLVING THE ASSEMBLY SOON AFTER, WITH
ELCTIONS TO BE HELD EARLY IN 1977. IN THIS THEORY,
SHE AVOIDS THE TRADITIONAL BUDGET MESSAGE WHICH IS
ALSO A POLICY DOCUMENT AND HAS THE FINANCE MINISTER
PRESENT MERELY AN "ON ACCOUNT" BUDGET. OTHERS
WOULD ARGUE THT A POPULAR "ELECTION" BUDGET IN
NOVEMBER LOWERING PRICES AND TAXES, TO BE FOLLOWED
SOON AFTER BY THE DISSOLUTION OF THE ASSEMBLY, WILL
BE THE COURSE THE PIRME MINISTER WILL FOLLOW. AND,
OF COURSE, SHE MAY INSTEAD DECIDE TO STAY IN POWER
UNTIL THE END OF HER TERM IN THE HOPE THAT A GOOD
MONSOON WILL GIVE A BOOST TO THE ECONOMY OR, AGAINST
THE INCREASING EVIDENCE TO THE CONTRARY, THAT OIL
WILL BE FOUND OFFSHORE.

13. POSSIBLE EFFECT ON U.S.-SRI LANKA RELATIONS:

OUR ASSESSMENT IS THAT THE HOLDING OF ELECTIONS WITHIN THE CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF SRI LANKA (NO LATER THAN FOUR MONTHS FOLLOWING MAY 22, 1977) WOULD BE IN OUR INTEREST. IT WOULD REPRESENT A CONTINUATION
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AND REINFORCEMENT OF THE DEMOCRATIC TRADITION WHICH THE SRI LANKANS HAVE CLUNG TO SINCE INDEPENDENCE IN 1948. THESE TRADITIONS HAVE PROVIDED A BOND AND COMMON GROUND BETWEEN THE U.S. AND SRI LANKA. ALSO, THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTIONS SEEM MORE LIKELY TO BE A SHIFT TOWARD A MODERATE CENTRIST GOVERNMENT, WHETHER A UNP GOVERNMENT OR SOME TYPE OF COALITION EMERGES. IF SO, ECONOMIC POLICIES ARE LIKELY TO CONTINUE THE TREND TOWARDS MORE PRAGMATISM AND AN EXPANDED ROLE FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR WHICH COULD INCREASE PRODUCTION AND THEREBY ALLEVIATE SRI LANKA'S BASIC PROBLEMS, WHICH ARE ECONOMIC. ALSO, SHOULD MRS. BANDARANAIKE FOLLOW THE LEAD OF HER NORTHERN NEIGHBOR AND POSTPONE ELECTIONS, THIS COULD CREATE A PUBLIC RELATIONS PROBLEM FOR HER GOVERNMENT IN THE U.S., UNDERMINE OUR SUPPORT FOR HER GOVERNMENT AND PROVIDE AN OPENING FOR THE LEFTISTS TO EXPAND THEIR INFLUENCE HERE. IN THE LAST ANALYSIS, SRI LANKA'S RETENTION OF THE FORMS OF PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY IS PERHAPS THE PRINCIPAL FEATURE THAT DISTINGUISHES THIS SMALL, POOR NATION FROM THE HOST OF PETTY DICTATORSHIPS THAT CHARACTERIZE THE MAJORITY OF THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES.
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